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ABSTRACT

In "Discourse in the Novel," M. Bakhtin notes that writing and speaking are both fundamentally social acts--every utterance "exists in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions" until the writer/speaker is able to appropriate it as her own. As an institution, the writing center enacts the Bakhtinian notion of dialogue through its individualized approach to writing instruction. Yet it simultaneously resists a social view of writing in its constant concern over upholding a student's absolute ownership of his/her text. Even more so than writing instructors, writing tutors have been faced with the ethical problem of negotiating the boundaries between "legitimate collaboration" with a student and "unfair influence" over that student's text. Erring on the side of caution, tutors have typically adopted a "hands off" approach to tutoring by refusing to provide content information that did not originate for the students themselves. Yet in the Bakhtinian model, such distinctions among student's, tutor's, and teacher's ideas are fallacious and possibly damaging, for the dialogic sharing of such ideas is exactly what enables a student to learn. Thus, focusing on the ways in which the Bakhtinian notion of dialogue problematizes the question of textual "ownership" in a writing center context, blurring the boundary between "just tutoring" and "plain cheating." Further, this calls into question the nature of a writing tutorial that challenges the student's ownership of what s/he produces. Contains seven references. (Author/RS)

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Community Texts: Bakhtin in the Writing Center

In the writing center, one of the things that can make a tutor truly cringe is to hear a student say, "Hey--that sounded really good. Would you say it again so I can write it down?" At the writing center, one of our greatest goals is to resist imposing our own ideas onto our students' papers, to refrain from giving them the "answers" to the writing problems that they are having and instead to work with them on their texts collaboratively. In "Minimalist Tutoring," Brooks argues that "the student, not the tutor, should 'own' the paper and take full responsibility for it. The tutor should take on a secondary role, serving mainly to keep the student focused on his own writing" (14). Thus, we even resist presenting students with some of our own ideas as possible options to explore in writing their papers, for we know that, despite our best efforts, our voices still ring authoritatively in their ears. Thus, writing centers have developed a series of strategies to help tutors keep themselves from doing the work for their students, strategies which include refusing to edit or proofread, asking non-directive questions, and even sitting on their hands to avoid picking up a pen. Furthermore, tutors often choose not to work with students who are writing papers within their own area of specialization, for in such situations it is often even more difficult for the tutor to withhold the sharing of his/her own expertise on the topic. Yet despite such measures, students continue to make statements like the one mentioned earlier; they still find some of their tutor's utterances meaningful and they still want to incorporate them into their papers.

Clearly, the question of textual "ownership," or whose ideas are presented in the text, remains a major one in the writing center context, often causing friction not only within the

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tutorial situation itself, but also between the tutorial and the classroom as teachers become concerned over the unfair help that their students might be receiving. Thus, while most writing centers indicate collaboration as one of their main goals in the tutor/student relationship, they also adhere to a principle of "minimalist tutoring" like the one described. As a result, many tutors remain unsure of how far "collaboration" should go when they are actually in the tutorial situation. When does "collaboration" become "unfair influence, or even "plagiarism," in the tutorial context and where should a tutor draw the line? Is it possible to work collaboratively with a student and still have her do "all the work" as Brooks suggests?

Given this concern both within and without the immediate writing center context, writing center administrators need to further examine this question of textual ownership, particularly with regard to the parameters of the tutorial situation. To do this, we must not limit ourselves to only questioning our tutoring methods; we must also call into question our basic ideas of what a writing center is and what it should and should not do for our students. Even more specifically, we should begin by questioning exactly what we mean when we privilege the notion of "collaboration" in the writing tutorial. In a classroom context, "collaboration" often signals two or more students putting hopefully equal, though not necessarily identical, effort into an assignment--it should be something to which they both contribute their words and ideas and from which they both learn. Clearly, though, such a definition of collaboration--one in which tutor and student are both actively engaged in the construction of the text--would not be appropriate in a writing center context . . . or would it? In fact, I wish to argue that such a view of collaboration is not only appropriate, but inevitable when it is applied to a tutorial context, for writing centers, unlike most classrooms, rely almost exclusively on a Bakhtinian notion of dialogue as their

primary pedagogical tool. As I will show, it is this very reliance on a Bakhtinian dialogue as a way of learning that calls into question the notion of textual "ownership" in the writing center, blurring the boundary between "collaboration" and what some might call "plagiarism."

Bakhtinian Dialogue

For Bakhtin and his circle, all language usage, every utterance, is, simply put, "a link in a very complexly organized chain of other utterances" ("The Problem of Speech Genres" 69). Rather than being the sort of individual, self-contained, creative act that had been posited by linguists such as Saussure, the utterance of any given speaking subject is seen by Bakhtin as thoroughly embedded in the utterances of other speaking subjects both past and present, carrying along half their meanings, half their intentions and nuances alongside its own. In "Discourse in the Novel," Bakhtin further reminds us that writing and speaking are both fundamentally social acts--every utterance "exists in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions" until the writer/speaker is able to appropriate it as her own (294). Always "half someone else's," a writer's ideas, as well as her very language, can only be formulated through continual dialogizing with the writing and speaking other(s). Bakhtin writes,

> Within the arena of almost every utterance an intense interaction and struggle between one's own and another's word is being waged, a process in which they oppose or dialogically interanimate each other . . . one may speak of another's discourse only with the help of that alien discourse itself, although in the process, it is true, the speaker introduces into the other's words his own intentions and high- lights the context of those words in his own way ("Discourse in the Novel" 354-5).

Despite this warlike imagery, the individual utterance does not necessarily seek to obliterate the utterances of others--nor does it really have the capability of doing so--but it does selectively incorporate, re-accentuate, and/or adapt those utterances of others into itself. Calling this a process of "assimilation," Bakhtin defines it as follows:

> . . . the unique speech experience of each individual is shaped and developed in continuous and constant interaction with others' individual utterances . . . Our speech . . . is filled with others' words, varying degrees of otherness or varying degrees of "our-own-ness," varying degrees of awareness and detachment. These words of others carry with them their own expression, their own evaluative tone, which we assimilate, rework, and re-accentuate ("The Problem of Speech Genres" 89).

Obviously then, such a process goes beyond mere mimesis; as Bakhtin argues, when the influence of others' utterances is "deep and productive," then "there is no external imitation, no simple act of reproduction, but rather a further creative development of another's (more precisely, half-other) discourse in a new context and under new conditions" ("Discourse in the Novel" 347).

As an institution, the writing center enacts this Bakhtinian notion of dialogue through its individualized approach to writing instruction; we believe that our discussions with our students do have a profound impact on their writing and thinking, and we welcome that impact. Yet we simultaneously resist making that impact in our constant concern over upholding a student's primary ownership of her/his text. As Bakhtin makes clear, however, such absolute ownership of a text (either verbal or written) is impossible; even before the student brings his/her paper into the writing center, it has been influenced and shaped, either consciously or unconsciously, by a multiplicity of other discourses, among them teachers, parents, classmates, textbooks, and friends.

The student has appropriated/reworked/re-accentuated these utterances just as s/he will appropriate/rework/re-accentuate the writing center tutor's utterances. Yet there seems to be an essential difference between these other forces that shape a student's writing and the impact of working with a writing center tutor. These other influencing discourses are, unlike the writing center, usually invisible to both student and teacher. Even if they are visible (such as quoting from a textbook or a lecture), they are viewed merely as support for the student's "own" ideas.

In a writing center tutorial, however, the enactment of the dialogic process is impossible to overlook, for it represents a verbal and visual externalization of the process, an externalization that undeniably highlights the completely constructed nature of the student's "own" language and writing. Such a realization makes both teacher and tutor highly uncomfortable. As teachers, we are forced to realize that our students cannot be given sole credit for all that they have written, that they are instead re-accentuating other's words, including our own, and that the line between collaboration and plagiarism might, in some places, be little more than an arbitrary one. As tutors, we are forced to realize that we cannot "collaborate" with our students without engaging in this process of meaning-making, that we cannot even talk to them without it occurring. And even when we are engaged in "minimalist tutoring," we certainly cannot fool ourselves into thinking that the student is really "doing all the work."

Exploring exactly what we mean when we talk about collaboration in the writing center has revealed that this principle is in direct conflict with the practice of minimalist tutoring. This mutual uneasiness between the writing center's twin goals of collaboration and minimalist tutoring seem to stem from multiple ideas about the writing center's purpose, ideas which, like language itself, have historically remained in conflict with one another. By examining four different "ideas"

of the writing center and its relation to student writers, we can determine how this discrepancy in tutoring philosophies occurred. In addition, it may provide an explanation for the fear of "unfair influence" which many teachers and tutors experience when students come to the writing center.

Ideas of a Writing Center

Attempting to define the idea of a writing center, to theorize (and often justify) its existence, is not new. In "The Idea of a Writing Center"(1984), Stephen North attempts to combat the popular misconception that writing centers serve merely as a "fix-it" shops for writers with "special problems in composition" and instead to establish it as a place where writers of any level of ability come to talk about their writing (72). In "Collaboration, Control, and the Idea of a Writing Center" (1991), Andrea Lunsford describes three possible views of writing centers and their purposes: writing centers as "storehouses" distributing knowledge, as "garrets" helping the lone, romantic writer produce his/her own unique kind of knowledge, and as "Burkean parlors" encouraging the collaborative construction of knowledge. This third view of the writing center, the "Burkean parlor," claims to take collaboration as its first principle and seeks to distribute power evenly among tutors and students. Such a writing center would, according to Lunsford:

> place control, power, and authority not in the tutor or staff, not in the individual student, but in the negotiating group. It would engage students not only in solving problems set by teachers but in identifying problems for themselves; not only working as a group but in monitoring, evaluating, and building a theory of how groups work; not only in understanding and valuing collaboration but in confronting squarely the issues of control that successful collaboration inevitably raises; not only in reaching consensus but in

valuing dissensus and diversity (113-114).

This notion of writing center as "Burkean Parlor" seems to build from Bakhtinian concepts of dialogue in its view of knowledge not as the exclusive property of the tutor ("Storehouse") or as the exclusive property of the student ("Garret"), but as constructed by both through discourse. Yet despite the popularity of this model among writing centers today, it is still compromised by the earlier notions of "Fix-it shop," "Storehouse," and "Garret." While this is partially based on outsiders' misunderstanding of the writing center's purpose, it is nonetheless true that even the "Burkean Parlor" type of writing center typically maintains vestiges of these other types. For example, teachers are often still encouraged to refer to the writing center students with special difficulties in grammar or punctuation (Fix-it shop). Writing centers still maintain reserves of reference books and handouts which they make readily available to students who ask for them (Storehouse). And, in attempting to practice a pedagogy of minimalist tutoring, writing centers still cling to the romantic view of language as originating solely from an individual author(Garret).

Just as various competing discourses make themselves heard in any utterance, so do these various manifestations of the writing center make themselves felt in its current philosophy and practice. While Bakhtin has shown us that it would be impossible to expel these competing discourses in favor of a unified view of the writing center, we can still be aware of the ways in which they inform and shape our present pedagogy. For example, when we, as tutors and teachers, become concerned about the influence we are having on a student's writing (i.e., that a student might essentially be plagiarizing our words), we are treating ourselves as "Storehouses" which already hold pre-formulated knowledge that the student is trying to access. Conversely, when we worry about retaining a student's ownership of his/her text, we are attempting to work

from a "Garret" view of the writing center. Yet, as tutors, it is essential to realize that any time we engage in a dialogue with our students we are entering into an already on-going process of meaning-making and that if we attempt to privilege the writer's voice and restrain our own, we are, in Gillam's words, "stunt[ing] the growth of conversation, the writing center's richest resource" (128). We simply cannot withhold our own voices, for they are what ultimately help a student learn, and help a student write. In *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (1929), Vološinov (a member of Bakhtin's intellectual circle) writes:

> The word is a two-sided act. It is determined equally by whose word it is and for whom it is meant . . . A word is a bridge thrown between myself and another. If one end of the bridge depends on me, then the other depends on my addressee. A word is territory shared by both addresser and addressee, by the speaker and his interlocutor (86).

I can think of no better model for this view of language than the writing tutorial.

In conclusion, while I do not by any means wish to argue that the notion of "plagiarism" is made obsolete by a Bakhtinian view of the utterance or that equal "collaboration" should be the goal of every tutorial session, I do feel that it is necessary to acknowledge the ways in which Bakhtin problematizes the work that we do in the writing center. As writing center tutors and administrators, we should think about where we set our parameters in our interactions with students and why we set them where we do. In tutor training and in staff meetings, we should feel free to share with our colleagues situations in which we felt we helped a student "too much" and to explore that reaction. Furthermore, we should initiate discussion with our colleagues who practice in the classroom to understand their own definitions of collaboration and plagiarism and to determine their feelings about the work we do with their students. Perhaps most importantly,

however, we must realize that each interaction with a student, each tutorial, is unique; no one set of parameters, guidelines, or rules will work with them all. Hannah Arendt reminds us that, "For Excellence, the presence of others is always required." By remaining aware of the effect of our "presence" on student writers, the writing center can continue to contribute to their excellence.

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ABSTRACT

In "Discourse in the Novel," Bakhtin reminds us that writing and speaking are both fundamentally social acts -- every utterance "exists in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions" until the writer/speaker is able to appropriate it as her own (*The Dialogic Imagination* 294). Always "half someone else's," a writer's ideas, as well as her very language, can only be formulated through continual dialogizing with the writing and speaking other(s).

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Thus, this paper will focus on the ways in which the Bakhtinian notion of dialogue problematizes the question of textual "ownership" in a writing center context, blurring the boundary between "just tutoring" and "plain cheating." Further, it will address the question, "What is it about the nature of a writing tutorial that makes us so seriously question the student's ownership of what s/he produces?"